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SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: VENEZUELA'S "PEACE BASE" CAUSES CONTROVERSY

11. (SBU) Summary: The Venezuelan government's establishment in late September of an anti-US "Peace Base" in San Jose is causing continuing controversy in Costa Rica, and proving to be a large public relations misstep for the GBRV. The "Peace Base", which is billed as Hugo Chavez's response to the US - Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement, appears to be little more than an attention-getting title for a discussion forum. That said, it has riled Costa Ricans who pride themselves on a history of pacifism and consider the US a close ally. To date the GOCR has criticized but tolerated Chavez's newest initiative, and the MFA is waiting for an "official explanation" from the Venezuelan Embassy as to the purpose of the "Peace Base". End Summary.

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PEACE BASE IN A COUNTRY OF PEACE  
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12. (SBU) Venezuela's Ambassador to Costa Rica, Nestor Pineda Prada, officially opened the "Peace Base" in the Venezuelan Embassy on September 30, to create a forum to discuss the "militaristic threat that advances the American empire...under the guise of the war on drugs." The "Peace Base" came after the opening of similar fora in Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua, with a center in Panama scheduled to open in the coming months.

13. (SBU) However many Costa Ricans, whose government abolished its military in 1948 and whose country often provides a refuge in an otherwise turbulent region, were perceptibly offended by the Venezuelan initiative. Pineda's public statement that "many Costa Ricans had told (him) that they would like a Chavez in Costa Rica," also struck a sour note. Costa Rican President and Nobel Peace Laureate Oscar Arias blasted the center, stating that "one can learn how to play baseball from Venezuela, but they can't teach us anything about peace." A Facebook group immediately sprung up named "No to the Peace Base in Costa Rica", quickly attracting over 2,300 members. And Minister of the Presidency (and the President's brother) Rodrigo Arias questioned whether the "Peace Base" violated the Vienna Convention, ordering the MFA to "examine in detail the implications of (the) initiative."

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MFA RESPONSE

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14. (SBU) Yet the tough talk by Costa Rican officials has led to little action by the GOCR. The MFA has sent a diplomatic note to the Venezuelan Embassy asking for more information about the "Peace Base", and says that it is closely monitoring the program. Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno has called on the GRBV to change the name of the initiative, deeming "Peace Base" inappropriate in "a country of peace." But the GOCR has not called on the GRBV to cancel the program, or officially stated that it violates the Vienna Convention. An MFA official privately told us that their options for regulating the program seemed limited, as the GRBV has not established any new physical building for the "Peace Base", and it currently exists only as a loose forum that occasionally meets at the Venezuelan Embassy.

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THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROBLEM

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15. (SBU) The strong condemnation by Costa Rican officials and negative reaction by the public over the "Peace Base" initiative seem to have taken the Venezuelans by surprise. The last significant "Peace Base" meeting was held in mid-October, with roughly fifty attendees. Since then the GRBV, in a weak attempt to deflect criticism, has made the dubious claim that the "Peace Base" in Costa Rica was not directed by Caracas, but instead was an initiative of Ambassador Pineda.

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COMMENT: A GRBV MISSTEP

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16. (SBU) One of the GRBV's primary missteps in launching their "Peace Base" was as simple as the name itself. If they had named their program anything else the reaction of Costa Ricans, who proudly guard their reputation as the "most" peaceful country in the region, would have been much less severe. Additionally, the activist, aggressive approach of GRBV Ambassador Pineda since his arrival in 2008, and his vituperative public comments about the US, have generally not gone over well with the Costa Ricans.

17. (SBU) Just Prior to Pineda's announcement of the "Peace Base", post combined efforts with the Colombian embassy to put out an op-ed piece in the popular newspaper "The Nation" (copied to the diplomatic community), based on WHA guidance, to explain the actual basis and facts regarding the CDA with Colombia. That piece was well received by the MFA and others, and our subsequent follow-up with President Arias on the occasion of the visit of Southcom Deputy Civilian Commander Ambassador Trivelli prompted Arias to immediately instruct the MFA to look in the "Peace Bases."

18. (SBU) That said, the harsh words of a month ago have generally led to a 'wait and see' approach on the part of the GOCR. While Venezuelans have been very quiet since the strong GOCR reaction, this issue could easily come to the forefront again, especially as Costa Rica moves into full campaign-mode ahead of the February 2010 national elections.

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